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SUBJECT: BENIN: GOB RESCHEDULES LOCAL ELECTIONS

REF: (A) COTONOU 043 (B) 07 COTONOU 817

1.(U) Summary: The Government of Benin postponed by two months the local elections that were initially scheduled for February 17, 2008 (Ref A). The government's decision to delay the elections until April 13, 2008 came after long delays in the selection of the National Independent Electoral Commission, known by its French acronym CENA. While the path to elections now appears clear, members of President Yayi's political movement have challenged the composition of the CENA's executive board in the Supreme Court. End Summary.

Election Delayed and CENA Begins Work

2.(U) On February 8, 2008 the GOB's Council of Ministers (USG Cabinet equivalent) decided to delay local elections until April 13 in consideration of the deadline prescribed by the electoral law and to allow the CENA to complete the preparations for the elections. According to the electoral law, CENA's members must be named at least 90 days ahead of the voting and take office no later than 60 days before. The Council of Ministers' decision sought to conform to this requirement of the electoral law.

3.(U) The CENA's Executive Board met February 6 - 8 to name its department (province) level representatives, plan its activities leading up to the election, and draft a budget for submission for the government's approval. While the CENA did not release the exact amount of the proposed budget, Codjo Achode, the CENA's spokesperson, stated that the elections would cost less than past elections. He underscored that the budget estimate the CENA proposed for the election is below \$20,000,000 (1 Billion FCFA).

Terms Extended

4.5. (U) Deputies of the National Assembly approved a bill to extend the terms of municipal officials until the new elections on April 13. Such a law is necessary because the terms of current municipal officials would have expired on March 17 thereby creating a legal void at the head of the different municipalities.

Comment

5.6. (SBU) Comment: While it now appears, with a functioning CENA and a realistic date for voting, that the path to elections is clear another potential obstacle has arisen. According to a trusted source from the CENA's Permanent Secretariat (SAP/CENA), a representative of the GOB has challenged, before the Supreme Court, the composition of CENA's executive board because it lacks a

government representative. This challenge is based on the composition of former executive boards which have always had a government representative. According to the same source, while the challenge may necessitate a change in the CENA's executive board it should not affect the electoral agenda. The significant, and continuing delays, in holding what should be fairly simple local elections point to the GOB's need to reform its electoral system and create a permanent electoral commission with a fixed budget and well defined election dates. At present the electoral "wheel" is re-invented with every election. End Comment.

BROWN